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Reconstructed Memories

By
Sarah Vaughn

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Glass

School of American Craft
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology
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Abstract:**The Beginning is the End of the Piece You Started With**

I want to explore the use of visual narrative to convey the breadth of emotion within a moment. The scenes I create are snapshots of stories whose roots are based in my own memories. These pieces from my mind are usually partial and fleeting, recalled as if viewing my own life from a third person perspective. Primarily through the use of advanced methods in kiln forming glass, the work will create a three dimensional illustration of these experiences.

The Art of Reconstruction:

I think about life, what I am making, and why I am making it. I look back to the past as well as where I am, and the people I have let in or out of my life. The lines separating the actual events blur; the real and the imagined become one memory and, at times, the reality of a situation gives way to a metaphor created to convey what I am feeling while removing the personal experience. This neutrality allows me the opportunity to focus on what happened internally and how that has taken an effect on me. To simplify, the objective of my MFA Thesis body of work is to tell a story whose roots are based in a personal reality, yet stands before the viewer as an ambiguous, fantastical narrative.

It is my intention to create pages from made up stories depicting moments from the life or “adventures” of a girl. Watching her placed again and again in situations without being aware of how she got there, how she dealt with them, not knowing if she conquered the problem she is presented with, or if it defeated her gives the viewer the option to become more invested in the girl’s story. They are given the opportunity to finish her story in their own minds. By removing many of the direct references to time, place, or my personal experiences from the visual context leaves a vague scenario; an objective situation is provided to consider. I am creating a tangible representation of the intangible sentiments of human emotion and personal memory.

These pieces are representational of the world as I see itas I remember it through my distorted eyes and years. It is important to me that the girl - while she is most

likely the same girl and most likely me - has an ambiguous age. She is child and adult at the same time. This agelessness, this uncertainty of her age, speaks to the years that some of the emotions and memories I am referencing span. I see my hands as huge, my wrists as long and skinny, waist as nonexistent and hips prominent. The physical attributes are not vain; they are simply a select few distorted versions of me that I see when I reflect upon my life.

The events that I choose to represent have no environment. I see the environment as something that ties the experience to my specific memories and life. By removing details of the specific time and place I am not only able to relate to various moments from my own past, but also allow the viewer more freedom to fill in the gaps with their own personal narratives. When I recall events I recall multiple events at a time: memories similar in their nature, their emotion and in their content. Yet I find their landscape to be geographically so different, years and time zones apart. I find myself represented as a child, a teenager and a grown woman all at once. Perhaps the scenes will have a detailed environment but the others exist in no specific time. The ones that seem to span the years, the repetitious moments I find myself reliving again and again. These are the instants that will live in an invisible, nonexistent place in my mind; a space unconstrained with the details of geography and focused on the repeat events. It is a cycle I seemed doomed to repeat for eternity. There will always be light, but the night will always follow.

Thesis:

The Story That Lies Behind the Stories

I

While each of these pieces has its own unique set of memories and ideas attached to it, I have discovered common threads within the themes of individual works. What I have found is that the more I struggle with issues in my personal life and mind, the more variations of the idea manifest. At times it feels as though I am trying to understand the problem as much as I am attempting to convey these emotion-based ideas to the viewer.

Much of my work develops from looking back on what has happened. How I reacted to situations, how they impacted my life and how I am still being affected today. I get lost in my thoughts and cut myself off from the outside world for long periods of time while sorting out these memories.

In the work *Contemplation* both the visual and conceptual were influenced by a very specific memory, time, and place. This moment took place my first time exploring the country. It was the furthest I had ever been from my family and everything I knew. On this trip I realized how big the world really was, but, at the same time, how small it seemed. In this singular moment of time I was overwhelmed with feelings of despair, desperation, loss, and failure. Yet, interestingly enough, these emotions coupled simultaneously with hope, calmness, peace and relief. I felt like I understood everything and nothing all in that moment.

Both *Distorted Perceptions* and *Lost in My Little World* are, like *Contemplation*, works whose visual presence directly relates to specific memories or times in life. Like the previously discussed piece, these works are rooted in memory, but touch specifically on the idea of losing one's self in these moments of contemplation and avoid reality. In *Distorted Perception* the viewer is presented with a reflection on the water, a reversed and distorted representation of the world. I have always felt that looking in the water is like looking in a warped mirror. At various points spanning though out growing up and growing older I have found myself lying off the edge of a dock staring into the water. I look at the reflection and through the reflection at the same time. I

watch the water flow into the dock and bounce back from where it came. Like the girl sitting on the cliff, she is lost in her thoughts. They flow, like the water, between perceptions of reality, pondering what is real, and how the world can be so drastically different depending on from what angle you look at it.

Lost in My Little World begins a bridge into a new branch of the body of work. The initial perception of this piece is becoming so focused in someone else's or a small component of your own life that you lose touch with the magic that is happening around you. The butterfly girl is so focused on what is happening in the jar - wondering if the butterfly will fly away, crawl out, or stay put - that she seems unaware of the free ones on her back and swarming above her head. If she would just look up for a second she would become aware of the world happening around her. I feel that this is a theme I have revisited many times in my sketchbook; becoming so fixated on something that you cannot see the whole picture. I equate this experience to be much like looking at something painted in the style of pointillism¹ or impressionism²; if you are too close to the picture it does not make sense.

In *Knitting in Circles* I see a girl who is working hard to solve her problems without actually accomplishing anything. The repetitive nature of knitting can be a comfort. For this girl, who is naked and exposed without the blanket, she seems to be working towards more warmth, more comfort, and coverage. The blanket is her security because of the protection it offers and the physical distraction of creating it, but she is pulling the yarn from the blanket itself; creating while destroying. While she may have been working for hours or days, she is not making progress. She is stuck, but she is focused on the needles and keeps clicking away. Like the butterfly girl, she is lost in what is right in front of her, ignoring all else and feeling the comfort that she is working - even though it is getting her nowhere. Repetitive tasks, like knitting, are something that I have always found comfort in. There is a meditative quality to the simple repetitive movements. And the quiet clicking of the needles is as soothing to me as the sound of a steady spring rain.

II

Another way of approaching the idea of avoidance is addressed in the *Well Wisher*. At times it can seem all I can do is hope for the best. In others, I will do everything I can to avoid dealing with a real issue. It feels like it is human nature to try any other way to fix a problem instead of dealing directly with it. However, wishing our troubles away is not how you solve your problems. I wanted to make a piece that made the act of making a wish as difficult to make as it is to make it come true. I find that I have rarely been given the things for which I wish, if I want to achieve the tasks I have to go out and work hard for it. I have to struggle. I have to make my own dreams come true. The girl at the well is presented with a nearly impossible task in order to make her wish. She can try her luck throwing the coins or she can try to climb. Either way, she is in for a challenge. She could also walk away, defeated by a towering well. Like with the other scenarios created in this work the viewer is not told what she does. They are only allowed to see her when she first understands the daunting nature of the oversized wishing well.

III

As stated before, many of these pieces have to do with specific memories. Some of the problems the girls are presented with are inspired by the absence of memories or memories that have been recovered after years of searching for understanding. It is my belief that you cannot fully understand who you are as a person if you do not have all these pieces of yourself. Over the years I have worked through this idea through more abstract means. (Figures 1 to 7) *Hand-Me-Down Memories* is an offshoot of this idea. Understanding the people you came from, your roots and history is valuable knowledge for understanding your family and parts of yourself that may not have any other explanation.

I never met Liffet, my dad's mom. I am told she and I are very similar people. She was deeply loved by everyone, was kind of crazy, and that she was an amazing woman. I have been told that I get my drive to create from her and my organization skills. However, up until a few years ago, I knew next to nothing about her. She was never spoken of and may as well have been a complete stranger; someone I didn't even recognize in pictures. When I hear stories of her it is often my older cousins retelling a story told to them by one of my aunts or uncles. I have learned the words so well;

gotten the cadence just right so the story has become mine. I can tell it like I knew her, like I was there.

Before these stories began to be shared all I knew of her that she loved pinwheels. We would put pinwheels on her grave. Anytime there was a family gathering there were pinwheels. They were her. I still do not know why they represented her, but after a lifetime of being told so when I see a pinwheel I think of a lady I never actually knew. This has been something that has been in my thoughts most of my life. I wonder, as a person who has always felt like I was on the outer edge of belonging, if I had known this lady that I share so many traits with, would I better understand myself? Would I not feel like a square peg in a world of round holes?

While this is a piece I do not expect anyone to relate to as my family or I do, it is one where every tiny detail withholds importance. It is my intention that when people look at the figure in “Hand-Me-Down Memories” they ask themselves about the significance of her holding pinwheels. However, the ambiguity is meant to also allow the viewer to search for intention even if they do not understand the personal context involved within the work. That is my interest. The figure in “Hand-Me-Down Memories” does not really understand why these pinwheels are important, but she accepts that there is a reason; believing in this alone providing justified purpose to be good enough to carry on for her whole life.

IV

Though not always to the extent as with the Pinwheel girl, every detail of each piece is thought out. In these pieces everything from the length of their hair to the style and color of their clothing is considered while making the models. On top of the countless hours spent perfecting wax for the figures of these pieces I was spending many late nights creating my own little rabble or swarm³ of Monarchs. Approximately 180 1:10 scale butterflies to interact with the figure in *Lost in My Little World* and over 200 life-size glass Monarchs were installed within the exhibition space for *Reconstructed Memories*. While creating these butterflies I could not help but compare the physical act of making them to that of knitting. The repetitive motion of placing the stencil, filling the sifter with color, and creating the vibrations in the sifter by running a small

wooden peg over the ridged handle (which created a calming steady sound) to evenly place colored glass on the stencil was repeated for each color. The visual experience of working from blank, white shelf through the first stencils to a black butterfly (covering all the detailed color) back through the detail, then covering it again with white powder (turning clear after firing). The process is simple but required a certain level of meticulousness. The low temperature low-fired kiln formed glass process used results in extremely thin and delicate butterfly wings that have a subtle matt finish and a slight grainy quality to the finished piece.

These butterflies are representational of the fear of and desire to change. When I think of the Monarch Butterfly, the first thing that comes to mind is capturing them as a child. I know now that every time I touched their delicate wings I shorten their already brief lives. When they came it meant the end of summer, the start of something new. When I got older I learned why they were seasonal; I learned about their massive migration. The Monarch Butterfly travels thousands of miles and four generations to make a round trip. I thought about constantly traveling to the next place, searching for something that is better than where you are now; a constant the-grass-is-always-greener journey. I wondered if there was ever a butterfly that decided to stay where it was instead of moving on with the swarm; or if a butterfly ever decided to keep flying north when the rest turned south. I wondered if they knew how far they had to go and if they knew they would never be able to settle for long before it was time to move on. When I began to learn more about their migration I felt sorry for the nomadic traveling I felt they had to do. While I knew they did it to survive, I could not help but project my own feelings onto them. During this period I was moving hundreds of miles, spanning throughout multiple time zones in pursuit of my ambitions and desire to gain experience in the contemporary glass world. Every time a new opportunity presented itself I would wonder if I should take it, if it would be better than what I already had, or if I would be able to hold onto the friends and connection I had at present if I left.

The idea of moving on, accepting change and the unknown are concepts I am constantly struggling with. In life we cannot take back a mistake or simply rewind or press ctrl+Z⁴. In *Not as Easy as Just Letting Go* the viewer finds a girl tightly holding

on the string of a kite staring down at a pair of scissors. She has wrapped the string around her hands several times, making it difficult to simply loosen her grip. This piece is about that desire to let go of the struggle and strain of holding on to something that is fighting to get away. From knowing when to let go of a relationship that is doing more harm than good to wanting to quietly slip out of your life. Knowing when enough is enough and wanting it bad enough to actually follow through is something I have always struggled with. The problem is when you have been holding onto something for so long it is not as easy as just losing your grip and letting it slip away. I find myself holding onto things so tightly that it hurts me. When I finally start to loosen my grip I second-guess myself, fearing a mistake that cannot be undone. I am a person that is all or nothing. I have to cut ties such as these away or find myself right back where I was.

The figure in *Not as Easy as Just Letting Go* differs from the others in the show in the length of her hair; she lacks the long braid. When I am on the verge of a change, when I am finally ready to let go of a part of my life and move on to the next chapter I cut off most of my hair. While this girl has not let go yet - she has not severed any ties yet - she is mentally, emotionally and spiritually prepared to. We are seeing the moment just before it happens and the symbolism of this manifest itself through the physicality of her noticeably shorter hair. She is ready to cut loose the part of her past she has been holding onto and accept the change and the unknown of the future.

In making these all of these figures I found myself happily lost in my mind while creating my little worlds. At times it did feel as though I was working towards a solution to whatever problem these pieces were representational of, but really knowing all I was doing was thinking of it in a different way. It is my hope that by continually approaching these issues from different angles I will one day understand how to fully process them and lay them to rest. Until then, I will continue to work towards finding peace in my mind.

The Process of Distorting Memories and Making Little Worlds

I

I am not a writer, but I would like to think I am a storyteller. I was a storyteller before I was a maker. Growing up I had a vivid imagination and the fanciful world always seemed to make more sense than the real one. I liked how stories had endings. And how there were reasons for why things happened. Things were explained. I have always been troubled by the real world, where things don't have reasons and there is not guarantee of comprehension or explanation. As I grow older I find myself forgetting parts of the stories I knew as a child. As my memories fade I find myself in the same situation I was in when I was young: I do not always know how the story starts or ends. I can remember specific illustrations and little snippets of the tale, but there are large gaps.

It has been my ambition over the past two years to create three-dimensional illustrations of the stories I have created in response to my life in glass. Much of where my inspiration comes from for these scenes are my memories of events. I will spend countless hours surrounded by half unpacked boxes of photos, drawings, and clippings or piles of old sketchbooks; opened to a page set aside to find the same train of thought that continued years later in another book. The sketches and stories that resurface year after year are the ones that become works. Like ceramicist Craig Mitchell (Figures 8, 9), Carmen Lozar (Figures 10, 11) and Judy Hill (Figure 12) who also work in figurative narratives, my inspiration comes from my everyday life and my memories of it.

While digging through these old resources, I found threads connecting ideas that spanned years. While I remembered these events in my mind often what is written was a story or metaphor that would trigger a string of memories. In these writings and sketches I would focus in on the emotional impact experienced, an intangible and occasionally overwhelming thing. To help comprehend this I would remove my personal experience and project the impact into a fabricated event.

The ideas that continue to resurface are summarized in a thumbnail sketches and a few quick words. While the visual rendering often does not go far beyond that, I will continue to build up the ideas and stories behind a piece over several years before and

as it is being made. Over the years I have attempted to organize the chaos by dedicating a page to an idea once I decide to make it.

II

Upon nearing the completion of the pieces I planned on exhibition for *Reconstructed Memories* I began reflecting on how each piece related to one another and what the work represented as a whole. I began to look for the common thread that connected the works at their roots.

Three of the pieces in the show, *Deep Rooted I, II, and III*, were created as an afterthought as a result of this consideration. I realized that the work I was making was running along the same conceptual thread of the work I started making in 2006 (Figure 5). I realized that many of the works I have created over the years are different visual approaches to explaining my emotional reactions to events in my life. As I mature and become more comfortable with the sense of who I am, I find myself using less and less abstracted means of expressing myself. *Deep Rooted I, II, and III* are my tribute to where I was artistically and mentally seven years ago when I was graduating from Southern Illinois University. While I have grown and developed over these past few years I find myself revisiting themes and ideas through new approaches of visual narrative, material, and technique.

III

For the past ten years I have been an almost exclusive glass artist, though I try to avoid making the glass “glassy”. I love utilizing glass conceptually for many of the stereotypical reasons (its fragility and delicateness, and ability to immediately put people ill at ease from years of being told “Be careful, it’s glass”). Nonetheless, I do not like to rely on the glass to express these feelings. The girls are already small and delicate. They could be made of other materials and receive similar reactions, but when you learn they are made of glass they become all the more precious. All the conceptual enhancement aside, the reason I use glass is because I love the process. I love the challenges that I am presented with when attempting to master a new technique or express a new idea. I find the entire experience - while at times stressful - very therapeutic.

While pursuing this Thesis work I began an experiment with other mediums, primarily bronze and print. I realized that by altering the material of various components of my work I could further enhance the ideas I was attempting to convey. With bronze I felt I could push the idea of the strength or fragility of various components of the work. For example, with *Well Wisher* I opted to create the well out of bronze to further add weight and power of the problem being presented to the girl.

When working with the printing process I found I could give supplemental information about each piece by utilizing text and illustration. Although alluding to my fascination with stories and appreciation of illustrations, I also found the prints to have metaphorical significance in that I have always viewed paper as a temporary material; it can be easily lost, altered, damaged or destroyed. Much like the glass I view the paper as a fragile medium.

Whilst working with the printing process I could not help but think of the correlation of the ink with memory. At times, when printing from the plate, the ink will leave the image incomplete or smudge, altered from the original plate and becoming a unique representation of the original idea. I also reflect on how memories, like the ink on the paper can fade over time losing detail as they age and if left unprotected for too long the original subject matter can fade beyond recognition.

While I am utilizing this process to enhance each piece with hints of their back stories, I understand that the paper can be modified after the initial printing takes place and that the story I create can change depending on the order I display each print. The eventual goal is to bind the prints together to create little storybooks to accompany the figurative narratives, depicting images and text that are taken directly from my sketchbooks and memories. In doing so I know that there is the potential for additional text and images to be added to the prints that I create. While I view books as precious items containing records of the authors thoughts, I have always been drawn to the fact that as the book is passed from owner to owner new thoughts can be added, giving the pages the opportunity to become fluid and changing, like stories that are told again and again.

IV

When taking the reasons for the literal representation into consideration I found myself being brought back to the idea of stories. I was a kid who was raised on Aesop's Fables, Grimm's Fairy Tales, mythology, and the tales told by my grandparents of their own stories about when they were young. If there was a narrative quality, I was hooked. I loved losing myself in these tales. I always wanted to know what happened next. The older I got I found myself drawn to the more sinister side of stories. While I loved a good Disney happy ending I was more intrigued by the Brothers Grimm versions of these stories; the ones that did not always end with "Happily Ever After". I loved discovering the stories behind the stories. I loved that they had intention and meaning. I think it was this fascination with the reasons behind stories that I have such an attention to detail in my work now. They were moral lessons, explanations for events, and cautionary tales. I loved the concept of a choice to be good or bad, and when you chose to be bad there were consequences. Looking back though that is what fascinated me: the choice. The characters could choose their fates; the hero could choose to do the right thing, even if they would suffer. I intentionally place several of my girls in positions where they were primed to make a choice. Since they are unchanging it is left to the viewer to complete their story in their own mind.

V

While creating the figures in my Thesis work - the heroines of my untold stories - I found myself gracefully stumbling through the challenges of lost wax casting. While this was something I had done many times in the past, I was asking the glass to flow into very thin and highly detailed molds. Each piece was hand modeled using wax. The forms that I started with were body parts taken from a silicon mold I had made in 2008 of a highly distorted perception of myself. I like the idea of taking a figural representation of who I use to be and altering it to who I currently am. Because of the amount of time spent on each girl I began taking rubber molds of the new figures when they were about 75% complete. This allowed me to save time should a disaster occur in the kiln firing process. But it also provides a chance to rework ideas when in a different state of mind and in a different place in time. This situation allows the

elements of ephemera and transformation to result in the fabrication of vastly different versions of the same girl.

Once a wax of the figure was complete I would add vents and gates, allowing the glass to flow into all parts of the mold and air to escape. The wax figure is then invested using a plaster, silica, and water mixture; the wax positive then melted out with the use of steam, leaving a negative of the figure. The plaster and silica mixture creates a rigid mold that is able to maintain its shape during the casting and annealing process. However, during the high temperatures of the firing process, the investment material becomes brittle to the touch. This breaking down of investment material allows the glass piece to be easily removed with less risk of breaking. Once the casting is complete the gates and vents are removed through various cold working processes. The surface is cleaned and the figure is then ready for me to 'groom' by way of surface treatments appropriate to the part she plays within the narrative she's been created for.

And When You Get to the End Stop

These figures have always, at their heart, been self-portraits, becoming more and more evidently so as I continued with this body of work for my MFA Thesis exhibition. This practice of placing a personal representation in the work is pushing me to recognize of what I have been hinting at, to both the viewer and myself, for years, that these are my stories and my life; this is just my way of seeking comprehension from both myself and those who choose to look at my pieces. By inviting the viewer to understand and relate to the work I feel like the things I experience are no longer keeping me isolated. I feel I have utilized my artist voice to gain understanding and acceptance from those who have been part of my life for years, those I just met, and me. I have learned that I am a person who is happiest when making the work that speaks to my life.